

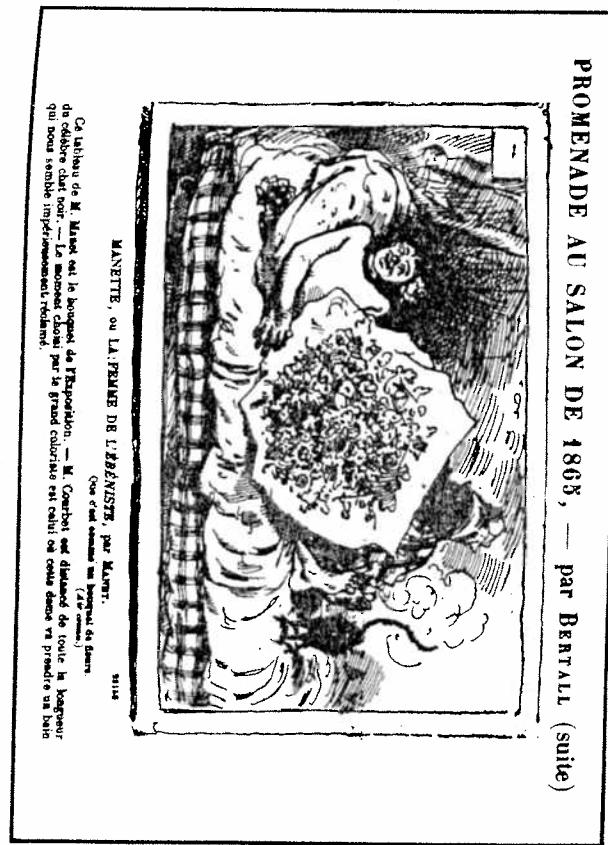
TIMOTHY J CLARK

# PRELIMINARIES TO A POSSIBLE TREATMENT OF 'OLYMPIA' IN 1865

## I

MANET WAS NOT in the habit of hesitating before trying to put his large-scale works on public exhibition; he most often sent them to the Salon the same year they were painted. But for reasons we can only guess at, he kept the picture entitled *Olympia* in his studio for almost two years, perhaps repainted it, and submitted it to the Jury in 1865 (Figure 1). It was accepted for showing, initially hung in a good position, and was the subject of excited public scrutiny and a great deal of writing in the daily newspapers and periodicals of the time. The 1860s were the heyday of the Parisian press, and a review of the *Salon* was established as a necessary feature of almost any journal; so that even a magazine called *La Mode de Paris*, which was little more than a set of covers for fold-out dressmaking patterns, carried two long letters from Dumas the Younger in its May and June issues, entitled 'A Propos du Salon. Alexandre Dumas à Edmond About'. The title — Edmond About was art critic of the *Petit Journal* — immediately suggests the degree of intertextuality involved. The 80-odd pieces of writing on the *Salon* in 1865, and the 60 or so which chose to mention Manet, were thoroughly aware of themselves as members of a family, jibing at each other's preferences, borrowing each other's turns of phrase, struggling for room (for 'originality') in a monotonous and constricting discourse.

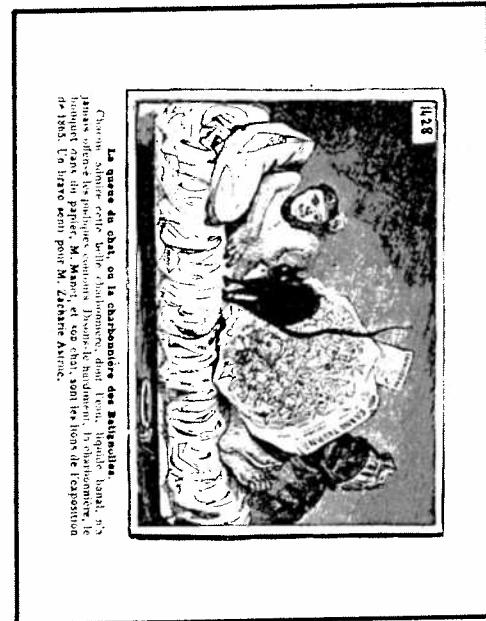
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BERTAUX. Caricature of Olympia. *Le Journal Amusant*, 27 May 1865

PHOTOGRAPHIE GIRAUDON



BERTALL Caricature of  
Olympia, *L'Illustration*, 3 June 1865



These verses greatly exercised the critics: they figured as one of the grounds for their contemptuous dislike. A complete study of *Olympia* and its spectators would be cumbersome, and I am not going to present it here.<sup>1</sup> What I intend to do is to examine the critical reaction to *Olympia* in the light of the lines of verse provided in the *Salon livret*:

Quand, lasse de rêver, Olympia s'éveille,  
Le Printemps entre au bras du doux messager noir,  
C'est l'esclave à la nuit amoureuse pareille,  
Qui vient fleurir le jour délicieux à voir.  
L'auguste jeune fille en qui la flamme veille.

If Manet's hesitation had to do with anxieties over what the papers would say, then what happened when the *Salon* opened was to prove his worst fears well-founded. The critical reaction to *Olympia* was decidedly negative. Only four critics out of sixty were favourably disposed to the picture, and that figure disguises the extremity of the situation: if we apply the test not merely of approval, but of some sustained description of the object in hand — some effort at controlled attention to particulars, some ordinary mobilisation of the resources of criticism in 1865 — then a response to *Olympia* simply does not exist, except in a solitary text written by Jean Revenel. Although there is also, I believe, some real investigation of *Olympia* in three caricatures, each with elaborate captions, by Bertall and Cham (Figures 2, 3, 4). That caricatures can have truck with Manet's picture in a way which art criticism cannot, points to one aspect of the problem. Their success has to do, I suppose, with the possibilities provided by a very different set of discursive conventions — a discourse in which the unmentionable and indescribable, for art criticism, can be readily articulated in comic form. It was not, incidentally, that the art critics failed to try for comic effect at *Olympia*'s expense; they did so interminably, but jokes, in this case, were rarely productive of knowledge.

I believe this mass of disappointing art criticism can provide an opportunity to say more about the relation of a text to its spectators. I shall regularly use the words 'text' and 'spectator' in this article, for all their awkwardness as applied to pictures. In the case of *Olympia* the vocabulary is not especially forced, since an important part of what spectators reacted to in 1865 was textual in the ordinary sense of the word: the perplexing title, the outlandish five

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2 C MacCabe, 'The Discursive and the Ideological in the Ideological in Film', *Screen* vol 19 no 4, p 36.

3 P Willemen, 'Notes on Subjectivity — On Reading "Subjectivity Under Siege"', *Screen* vol 19 no 1, p 55.

4 A Corbin, *Les Filles de nos, Misère sexuelle et prostitution aux 19e et 20e siècles*, Paris 1978.

instead is to sketch the necessary components of such a study, to raise some theoretical questions which relate to *Screen's* recent concerns, and to give, in conclusion, a rather fuller account of the ways in which this exercise might provide

*a materialist reading [specifying] articulations within the [picture] on determinate grounds.*<sup>2</sup>

II

There has been an impatience lately in the pages of *Screen* with the idea that texts construct spectators, and an awareness that films are read unpredictably: they can be pulled into more or less any ideological space, they can be mobilised for diverse and even contradictory projects.<sup>3</sup>

This is an impatience I share, and in particular find myself agreeing with Willemen that

the activity of the text must be thought in terms of which set of discourses it encounters in any particular set of circumstances, and how this encounter may restructure both the productivity of the text and the discourses with which it combines to form an inter-textual field which is always in ideology, in history. Some texts can be more or less recalcitrant if pulled into a particular field, while others can be fitted comfortably into it.

It seems to me that *Olympia* in 1865 provides us with something close to a limiting case of this recalcitrance; and one which with the array of critical writing at our disposal can be pieced out step by step. Recalcitrance is almost too weak a word, and insignificance or unavailability might do better, for what we are dealing with in 1865 are the remains of various failures — a collective failure, minus Ravanel — to pull *Olympia* within the field of any of the discourses available, and restructure it in terms which gave it a sense. There is a danger of exaggeration here, since the disallowed and the unforgivable are in themselves necessary tropes of nineteenth century art criticism: there had to be occupants of such places in every *Salon*. But a close and comprehensive reading of the sixty texts of 1865 ought to enable us to distinguish between a rhetoric of incomprehension, produced smoothly as part of the ordinary discourse of criticism, and another rhetoric — a breaking or spoiling of the critical text's consistency — which is produced by something else, a real recalcitrance in the object of study. It is an open question whether what we are studying here is an instance of subversive refusal of the established codes, or of a simple ineffectiveness; and it is an important question, given *Olympia's* canonical (and deserved) status in the history of avant-garde art.

III

I would like to know which set of discourses *Olympia* encountered in 1865, and why the encounter was so unhappy. I think it is clear that two main discourses were in question: a discourse in which the relations and disjunctions of the terms *Woman/Nude/Prostitute* were obsessively rehearsed (which I shall call, clumsily, the discourse on *Woman* in the 1860s), and the complex but deeply repetitive discourse of aesthetic judgement in the Second Empire. These are immediately historical categories, of an elusive and developing kind; they cannot be deduced from the critical texts alone, and it is precisely their absence from the writings on *Olympia* — their appearance there in spasmodic and unlikely form — which concerns us most. So we have to establish, in the familiar manner of the historian, some picture of normal functioning: the regular ways in which these two discourses worked, and their function in the historical circumstances of the 1860s.

*Olympia* is a picture of a prostitute: various signs declare that unequivocally. The fact was occasionally acknowledged in 1865: several critics called the woman *courtesane*, one described her as 'some redhead from the *quartier Bréda*' (the notorious headquarters of the profession), another referred to her as 'une manolo du bas étage'. Ravanel tried to specify more precisely, calling her a 'girl of the night from Paul Niquer's' — in other words, a prostitute operating right at the bottom end of the trade, in the all-night bar run by Niquer in *Les Halles*, doing business with a clientele of market porters, butchers and *chiffonniers*. But by and large this kind of recognition was avoided, and the sense that *Olympia's* was a sexuality laid out for inspection and sale appeared in the critics' writings in a vocabulary of uncleanness, dirt, death, physical corruption and actual bodily harm. Now this is odd, because both the discourse on *Woman* in the 1860s, and the established realm of art, had normally no great difficulty in including and accepting the prostitute as one of their possible categories. There is even a sense, as Alain Corbin establishes in his study of *le discours prostitutionnel* in the nineteenth century, in which the prostitute was necessary to the articulation of discourse on *Woman in general*.<sup>4</sup> She was maintained — anxiously and insistently — as a unity, which existed as the end-stop to a series of differences which constituted the feminine. The great and absolute difference was that between *fille publique* and *femme hommète*: the two terms were defined by their relation to each other, and therefore it was necessary that the *fille publique* — or at least her *haute bourgeoisie* variant, the *courtesane* — should have her representations. The *courtesane* was a category in use in a well-established and ordinary ideology: she articulated various (false) relations between sexual identity, sexual power and social class. Of

course at the same time she was declared to be almost unmentionable — at the furthest margin of the categorisable — but that only seemed to reaffirm her importance as a founding signification of Woman.

So it was clearly not the mere fact — the palpable signs — of Olympia being a prostitute that produced the critics' verbal violence. It was some transgression of *le discours prostitutionnel* that was at stake; or rather, since the characterisation of the *courtisane* could not be disentangled from the specification of Woman in general in the 1860s, it was some disturbance in the normal relations between prostitution and femininity.

When I introduced the notion of a discourse on Woman in the 1860s, I included the nude as one of its terms. Certainly it deserves to take its place there, but the very word indicates the artificiality of the limits we have to inscribe — for description's sake — around our various 'discourses'. The nude is indelibly a term of art and art criticism: the fact is that art criticism and sexual discourse intersect at this point, and the one provides the other with crucial representations, forms of knowledge, and standards of decorum. One could almost say that the nude is the mid-term of the series which goes from *femme honnête* to *fille publique*: it is the important form (the complex of established forms) in which sexuality is revealed and not-revealed, displayed and masked, made out to be unproblematic. It is the frankness of the bourgeoisie: here, after all, is what Woman looks like; and she can be known, in her nakedness, without too much danger of pollution. This too Olympia called into question, or, at least failed to confirm. One could put the matter schematically in this way. The critics asked certain questions of *Olympia* in 1865, and did not get an answer. One of them was: what sex is she, or has she? Has she sex at all? In other words, can we discover in the image of pre-ordained constellation of signifiers which keeps her sexuality in place? Further question: can Olympia be included within the discourse on Woman/the nude/the prostitute? Can this particular body, acknowledged as one for sale, be articulated as a term in an artistic tradition? Can it be made a modern example of the nude? Is there not a way in which the terms *nude* and *fille publique* could be mapped on to each other, and shown to belong together? There is no *a priori* reason why not. (Though I think there may be historical reasons why the mapping could not be done effectively in 1865: reasons to do with the special instability of the term 'prostitute' in the 1860s, which was already producing, in the discourse on Woman, a peculiar mythology of invasion, whereby the prostitute was made out to have vacated her place at the edges of society, and be engaged in building a new city in which everything was edges and no single demarcation was safe.)

It is a matter of tracking down, in the writings on *Olympia*, the appearance of the normal forms of discourse and the points/topics/tropes at which (or around which) they are simply absent, or present in a grossly disturbed state. For instance, the various figures of uncleanness, and the way these figures cannot be maintained as descriptions of sexual or moral status, but always teeter over into figures of death and decay. Or the figures which indicate the ways in which the hand of Olympia — the one spread over her public hair — disobeys, crucially, the conventions of the nude. The hand is *shamelessly flexed*, it is *improper*, it is in the form of a toad, it is dirty, it is in a state of contraction. It comes to stand for the way Olympia's whole body is disobedient: the hand is the sign of the unyielding, the unrelaxed, the too-definite where indefiniteness is the rule, the non-supine, the concealment which declares itself as such: the 'unfeminine', in short. Or again: the figures of physical violence done to the body, or of hideous constraint:

*a woman on a bed, or rather some form or other, blown up like a grotesque in indiarubber, a skeleton dressed in a tight jacket made of plaster, outlined in black, like the armature of a stained glass window without the glass.*<sup>5</sup>

Or the figures which intimate — no more than that — the critics' unease over Olympia's handling of hair and hairlessness: precious pudours, with which the nude makes clear its moral credentials. One of the easy triumphs of Bertall's caricature is to put the cat and flowers in place of the hand, and let us have the great explosion of foliage, and the black absence at its centre.

#### IV

Would it be helpful to say, at the conclusion of a reading of the critics, that *Olympia* failed to signify in 1865? I have already indicated some reservations about this: another would be the sheer neatness of the formula. But I think it possible to say that at its first showing *Olympia* was not given a meaning that was stabilised long enough to provide the framework for any further investigation — for some kind of knowledge, for criticism. It seems reasonable to call that a failure on *Olympia's* part; since the picture, it is clear to us now, certainly attempts — blatantly, even ponderously — to instate within itself a relationship to established, previous forms of representation. The evidence suggests that this relationship was not instated, for the spectators in 1865; or that even when it was — in the very few cases when the picture's points of reference were perceived — this did not lead to an articulated and consistent reading (whether one of approval or dissent).

5 Pierrot, 'Histoire de la Semaine ... Une première visite au Salon', *Les Tablettes de Pierrot*, 14 May 1865, p. 11; A. J. Lorentz, *Debriefing l'Exposition de 1865*, p. 13.

6 See B Farwell,  
*Manet and the  
Nude, A Study in  
Iconography in the  
Second Empire*,  
unpublished PhD,  
University of  
California at Los  
Angeles 1973,  
pp 199-204.

7 21 May 1865.

I shall give two examples: one concerning *Olympia*'s relation to Titian's so-called *Venus of Urbino* (Figure 5), and the other *Ravenel's* treatment of the picture's relation to the poetry of Baudelaire. That *Olympia* is arranged in such a way as to invite comparison with the Titian has become a commonplace of criticism in the twentieth century, and a simple charting of the stages of Manet's invention, in preparatory sketches for the work, is sufficient to show how deliberate was the reference back to the prototype.<sup>6</sup> The reference was not obscure in the nineteenth century: the Titian painting was a haloed and hackneyed example of the 'nude: when Manet had done an oil copy of it as a student, he would have known he was learning the very alphabet of Art. Yet in the mass of commentary on *Olympia* in 1865, only two critics talked at all of this relation to Titian's *Venus*; only twice, in other words, was it allowed that *Olympia* existed 'with reference to' the great tradition of European painting. And the terms in which it was allowed are enough to indicate why the other critics were silent.

'This *Olympia*', wrote Amédée Cantaloube in *Le Grand Journal*, the same paper that holds the bouquet in Bertall's caricature,

sort of female gorilla, grotesque in indiarubber surrounded by black, apes on a bed, in a complete nudity, the horizontal attitude of the Venus of Titian, the right arm rests on the body in the same way, except for the hand which is flexed in a sort of shameless contraction.

The other, a writer who called himself Pierrot, in a fly-by-night organ called *Les Tablettes de Pierrot*, had this entry:

a woman on a bed, or rather some form or other blown up like a grotesque in indiarubber; a sort of monkey making fun of the pose and the movement of the arm of Titian's *Venus*, with a hand shamelessly flexed.

The duplication of phrases is too closely, surely, to be a matter of chance, or even of dogged plagiarism. The two texts seem to me to be the work of the same hand — the same hack bashing out a swift paragraph in various places under various names. Which makes it one voice out of sixty, rather than two.

In any case the point is this. For the most part, for almost everyone, the reference back to tradition in *Olympia* was invisible. Or if it could be seen, it could certainly not be said. And if, once, it could be spoken of, it was in these terms: Titian's arrangement of the nude was there, vestigially, but in the form of absolute travesty, a kind of vicious aping which robbed the body of its femininity, its humanity, its very fleshiness, and put in its place



TITIAN *Venus of  
Urbino*, Florence,  
Uffizi

une forme quelconque, a rubber-covered gorilla flexing her dirty hand above her crotch.

I take Pierrot's entry, and the great silence of the other texts, as license to say, quite crudely in the end, that the meaning contrived in terms of Titian — on and against that privileged schema of sex — was no meaning, had no meaning, in 1865. (This is a matter which becomes familiar in the latter history of the avant-garde: the moment at which negation and refutation becomes simply too complete; they erase what they are meant to negate, and therefore no negation takes place; they 'refute their prototypes too effectively; and the old dispositions are — sometimes literally — painted out; they 'no longer apply'.)

The example of Ravenel is more complex. I have already said that Ravenel's text is the only one in 1865 that could possibly be described as articulate, and somehow appropriate to the matter in hand. But it is an odd kind of articulacy. Ravenel's entry on *Olympia* comes at the end of the eleventh long article in an immense series he published in *L'Époque*, a paper of the far left opposition.<sup>7</sup> It comes in the middle of an alphabetical listing of pictures which he has so far let out of account, and not allotted their proper place in the extended critical narrative of the first ten installments of the *Salon*. The entry itself is a peculiar, brilliant, inadvertent performance: a text which blurs out the obvious, blurs it out and passes on; ironic, staccato, as if aware of its own uncertainty.

M. Manet — *Olympia*. The scapegoat of the *Salon*, the victim of Parisian lynch law. Each passer-by takes a stone and throws it in her face. *Olympia* is a very crazy piece of Spanish madness.

which is a thousand times better than the platitude and inertia of so many canvases on show in the Exhibition.

Armed insurrection in the camp of the bourgeois: it is a glass of iced water which each visitor gets full in the face when he sees the BEAUTIFUL courtesan in full bloom.

Painting of the school of Baudelaire, freely executed by a pupil of Goya: the vicious strangeness of the little faubourienne, woman of the night out of Paul Niquet, out of the mysteries of Paris and the nightmares of Edgar Poe. Her look has the souness of some-one prematurely aged. Her face the disturbing perfume of a fleur de mal; the body fatigued, corrupted ['corruptu'] also carries the meaning 'tainted', 'putrid'], but painted under a single transparent light, with the shadows light and fine, the bed and the pillows are put down in a velvet modulated grey. Negress and flowers insufficient in execution, but with real harmony to them, the shoulder and arm solidly established in a clean and pure light. The cat arching its back makes the visitor laugh and relax, it is what saves M. Manet from a popular execution.

De sa fourrière noire [sic] et brune

Sort un parfum si doux, qu'en soir

J'en fus embaumé pour l'avoir

Caresse [sic] une fois... rein qu'une.

(From its black and brown fur / Comes a perfume so sweet, that one evening / I was embalmed in it, from having / Caressed it once... only once.)

C'est l'esprit famillier du lieu;  
Il juge, il preside, il inspire  
Toutes choses dans son empire:  
Peut-être est-il fée, est-il dieu?

(It is the familiar spirit of the place; / It judges, presides, inspires / All things within its empire: / Is it perhaps a fairy, or a god?)

M. Manet, instead of M. Astruc's verses would perhaps have done well to take as epigraph the quatrain devoted to Goya by the most advanced painter of our epoch:

GOYA-Cauchemar plein de choses inconnues  
De foetus qu'on fait cuire au milieu des sabbats,  
De vieilles au miroir et d'enfants toutes nues  
Pour tenir les démons ajustant bien leurs bas.

(Goya— Nightmare full of unknown things / Of foetuses cooked in the middle of witches' sabbaths, / Of old women at the mirror and children quite naked / To tempt demons who are making sure their stockings fit.)

Perhaps this olla podrida de toutes les Castilles is not flattering for M. Manet, but all the same it is something. You do not make an Olympia simply by wanting

ing for M. Manet, but all the same it is something. You do not

make an Olympia simply by wanting myself to saying one thing about it. Ravenel — it is the achievement which first impresses us, I suppose — breaks the codes of Olympia. He gets the picture right, and ties the picture down to Baudelaire and Goya; he is capable of discussing the image, half playfully and half in earnest, as deliberate provocation, designed to be anti-bourgeois; he can even give Olympia, for a moment, a class identity, and call her a *petite faubourienne* — a girl from the working-class suburbs — or a *fille des nuits de Paul Niquet*.

But getting things right does not seem to enable Ravenel to accede to meaning: it is almost as if breaking the codes makes matters worse from that point of view; the more particular signifiers and signifieds are detected, the more perplexing and unstable the totality of signs becomes. What, for instance, does the reference to Baudelaire connote, for Ravenel? There are, as it were, four signs of that connotation in the text: the 'school of Baudelaire' leads on (1) to the disturbing perfume of a *fleur du mal*, then (2) to two verses from a short poem from the first book of Baudelaire's collection, entitled *Le Chat*, a poem precise in diction, spare and lucid in rhythm, deliberately decorous in its intimations of sexuality; and then, in passing, (3) to the description of Baudelaire as 'le peintre le plus avancé de notre époque', where the ironic underlining of *avancé* does not make the meaning any easier to pin down; and finally (4) to the nightmare ride of Goya quatrains from *Les Phares*, the fetid stew of cooked foetuses and devil women, the self-consciously Satanic Baudelaire, the translator of *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*.

My point is this: the discovery of Baudelaire does not stabilise meaning. On the contrary, for a reader like Ravenel it destabilises meaning still further, since Baudelaire's meanings are so multiple and refractory, so unfixed, so unmanageable, in 1865. We are face to face with the only text equipped and able to take on the picture's central terms of reference; and this is how it takes them, as guarantee of its own perplexity, its opinion that the picture is a stew of half-digested significations. Perhaps guarantee is too weak a word in this connection: the code, once discovered, compounds the elusiveness; it speeds up the runaway shifts of connotation; it fails, completely, to give them an anchorage in any one pre-eminent, privileged system of signs.

The same is true for the recognition or attribution of class. Once again, we are entitled to draw breath at Ravenel's *petite faubourienne*. It may seem to us close to the mark, that phrase. But what does it signify in the text itself, what system of mean-

ings does it open on to? It means nothing precise, nothing maintainable: it opens on to three phrases, 'fille des nuits de Paul Niquet, des mystères de Paris et des cauchemars d'Edgar Poe'. A working girl from the *faubourgs*, a woman from the farthest edges of *la prostitution populaire clandestine*, soliciting the favours of *chiffonniers* (one might reasonably ask: With a black maid bringing in a tribute of flowers? Looking like this, with these accessories, this décor, this imperious presentation of self?)/a character out of Eugène Sue's melodramatic novel of the city's lower depths/a creature from Edgar Allan Poe. The shifts are motivated clearly, but it is thoroughly unclear what the motivation is: the moves are too rapid and abrupt, they fail to confirm each other's sense — or even to intimate some one thing, too elusive to be caught directly, but to which the various metaphors of the text all tend.

The identification of class is not a *brake* on meaning: it is the trigger, once again, of a sequence of connotations which do not add up, which fail to circle back on themselves, declaring their meaning evident and uniform. It may be that we are too eager, now, to point to the illusory quality of that circling back, that closure against the 'free play of the signifier'. Illusion or not, it seems to me the necessary ground on which meanings can be established and maintained. Kept in being long enough, and endowed with enough coherence, for the ensuing work of dispersal and contradiction to be seen to matter — to have matter, in the text, to work against.

#### V

Nashville articulates American politics and music in the space of cinema, and that articulation can only be understood by mobilising a heterogeneous set of knowledges (both cinematic and ideological) which will provide the specific analysis. Insofar as the knowledges we mobilise are, of necessity, heterogeneous, there can be no question that the reading produced is exhaustive. Between the alternatives of the formalist dream of the reading and the voluntarist nightmare of my/our reading, both of which exhaust the film's significance, a materialist reading specifies articulations within the film on determinate grounds.<sup>9</sup>

My questions about this passage would be: what determines which set of 'knowledges' are mobilised? Is there some means by

which we can test which readings are, if not exhaustive, at least appropriate? What is meant by 'determinate' in the last sentence? I suppose it will be obvious that my reading of *Olympia* will be produced as a function of the analysis of its first readings: I do not claim that this gives it some kind of objectivity, or even some privileged status 'within historical materialism'. But it provides

the reading with certain tests of appropriateness, or, to put it another way, it presents the reading with a set of particular questions to answer, which have been produced as part of historical enquiry. (I do not object to the formula 'historian's practice' here, as long as we are free to debate whether there are some practices of knowledge with more articulated notions of evidence, testing and 'matching' than others.)

My reading of *Olympia* would address the question: what is it in the image which produces, or helps produce, the critical silence and uncertainty I have just described? What is it that induces this indeterminable displacement and conversion of meanings? I would like, ideally, to give the answer to those questions an interleaved, almost a scholastic form, tying my description back and back to the terms of the critics' perplexity, and its blocked, unwilling insight into its own causes. Clearly, the reading would hinge on *Olympia*'s handling of sexuality, and its relation to the tradition of the nude. (It would also have to deal with its relation to a new and distinctive sub-set of that tradition: the burlesque and comic refutation of the nude's conventions set in train by Courbet in the 1850s. There is no doubt that the critics in 1865 wanted *Olympia* to be part of that sub-set, whose terms they approximately understood, if only to abhor them; and there are ways in which the picture does relate to Courbet's Realism. A painting of a prostitute in 1865 inevitably bore comparison with Courbet's *Demoiselles de la Seine* or *Venus Capitonne*; a comparison of subject-matter, obviously, but also of modes of address to the viewer, forms of disobedience to that 'placing of the spectator in a position of imaginary knowledge', which was the nude's most delicate achievement.) I shall give some element of the reading here.

#### VI

We might approach the problem by asking, would it do to describe the disposition of signs in *Olympia* as producing some kind (various forms) of ambiguity? The things I shall point out in the image may seem at first sight nothing very different from this. And the word would provide us with a familiar critical comfort, since it seems to legitimise the position of the a-historical 'interpreter' and allow the open, endless procession of possible meanings to be the very nature of the text, the way art ('literature') works, as opposed to mere practical discourse. I do not agree with that ethic of criticism, or the art practice it subtends. On the contrary, it seems to me that ambiguity is only functional in the text when a certain hierarchy of meanings is established and agreed on, between text and reader — whether it be a hierarchy of exoteric and esoteric, or common-sense and 'contrary', or narrative discourse and non-

<sup>9</sup> C MacCabe, *Screen*, op. cit., p. 36.

narrative connotation, or whatever. There has to be a structure of dominant and dominated meanings, within which ambiguity occurs as a qualifier, a chorus, a texture of overtone and undertone around a *tone* which the trained ear recognises or invents. To put it another way, there has to be, stabilised within the text, some primary and partially systematic signified, in order that the play of the signifier — the refusal of the signifier to adhere completely to that one set of signifieds — be construed as any kind of threat. It could be argued that *Olympia*'s recalcitrance is different from this. The work of contradiction — to repeat and generalise the point made with reference to Titian — might seem to be so complete in this picture that the reader is left with no primary system of signifieds to refer to, as a test for deviations. *Olympia* could be described as a tissue of loose ends, false starts, unfinished sequences of signification: none of them the main theme, none accompaniment exactly; neither systematic nor floating *semes*.

The picture turns, inevitably, on the signs of sexual identity. I want to argue that, for the critics of 1865, sexual identity was precisely what *Olympia* did not possess. She failed to occupy a place in the discourse on Woman, and specifically she was neither a nude, nor a prostitute: by that I mean she was not a modification of the nude in ways which made it clear that what was being shown was sexuality on the point of escaping from the constraints of decorum — sexuality proffered and scandalous. There is no scandal in *Olympia*, in spite of the critics' effort to construct one. It was the odd coexistence of decorum and disgrace — the way in which neither set of qualities established its dominance over the other — which was the difficulty of the picture in 1865.

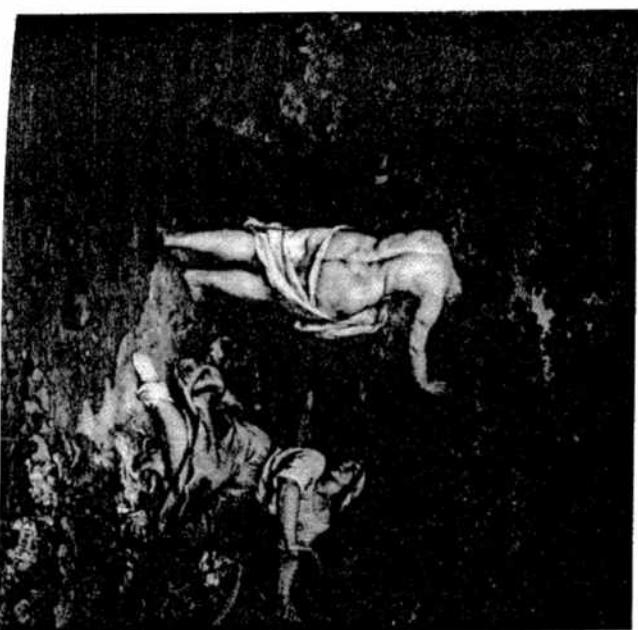
For instance, since the structure is grossly obvious here, the picture's textual support. On the one hand, there is the title itself, classical apparently and perceived by some critics as a reference to a notorious *courtisane* of the Renaissance; but in 1865, taking its place in the normal repertoire of prostitution, part of the tawdry, mock-classical lexicon of the trade.<sup>10</sup> But that *false* classical does not subside as the undisputed timbre of *Olympia* in the *Salon livret*, the reader was confronted by the five lines of 'explanatory' verse I have quoted already. It is bad poetry, but correct. It is a performance in an established mode. Parnassian restrained in diction, formal, euphemistic. Is the reader to take it seriously? Is it to be *Olympia*, cynical pseudonym, or 'l'auguste jeune fille en qui' — preposterous evasion — 'la flamme veille'? The disparity was obvious, I have said, and the critics could deal with it by simple, calm derision: they regularly did.

Other kinds of uncooperativeness were subtler and more complete, and the critics could only rarely identify what it was that refused their various strategies. I shall deal with three aspects of

the matter here: (a) The question of access and address; (b) The 'incorrectness' in the drawing of the body; (c) The handling of hair and hairlessness.

(a) One of the primary operations of the nude is, to borrow MacCabe's phrase again, 'a placing of the spectator in a position of imaginary knowledge'. The spectator's access to the presented body has to be arranged rather precisely; and this is done first through a certain arrangement of distance, which must be neither too great nor too small; and then through a placing of the naked body at a determinate height, which in turn produces a specific relation to the viewer. The body, again, must not be too high — put up on some fictive pedestal — nor too low, otherwise it may turn into an object of mere scrutiny, or humiliation — laid out on the dissecting table of sight.

In the 1830s, Realism had invented a set of refutations of just these placings; though it should be admitted that the refutations were intermittent and unstable. Perhaps it would be better to say that in certain paintings by Courbet there appeared the first forms, the first suggestions, of ways in which the placings of the nude might be negated. Courbet's *The Butcher* of 1853 is the strongest case (Figure 6), since it seems to have been such a deliberate sabotage:



COURTESY *The Butcher*  
Montpellier, Musée Fabre

10 See B. Farwell,  
op. cit., p. 233.

a travesty of the normal canons of 'Beauty', obviously, and an attempt to make the nude, of all unlikely genres, exemplify the orders of social class. *The Bather* was meant to be read as a *bourgeoise*, not a nude: she was intended to register as the unclothed opposite and opponent of male proletarian nakedness; and so Courbet displayed the painting in the *Salon* alongside another of roughly equal size, in which a pair of gnarled and exhausted professional wrestlers went through their paces in the *Hippodrome des Champs-Élysées*.

But *The Bather* broke the rules of the nude in other ways, which were hardly more subtle, but perhaps more effective. It seemed to be searching for ways to establish the nude in opposition to the spectator, in active refusal of his sight. It did so grossly, clumsily, but not without some measure of success, so that the critic at the time who called the woman 'this heap of matter, powerfully rendered, who turns her back with cynicism on the spectator' had got the matter right. The pose and the scale and the movement of the figure end up being a positive aggression, a resistance to vision in normal terms.

There is no doubt that for Manet and his critics in 1865 these precedents were inescapable: as I have said already, the critics wanted Manet to be a Realist in Courbet's terms. But *Olympia*, I would argue, takes up neither the arrangements by which the canonical images of the nude establish access, nor Realism's knock-about refutations. What it contrives is stalemate, a kind of baulked invitation, in which the spectator is given no established place for viewing and identification, nor offered the tokens of exclusion and resistance. This is done most potently, I suppose, by the woman's gaze — the jet-black pupils, the slight asymmetry of the lids, the smudged and broken corner of the mouth, the features half-adhering to the plain oval of the face. It is a gaze which gives nothing away, as the reader attempts to interpret its blatancy; a look direct and yet guarded, poised very precisely between address and resistance. So precisely, so deliberately, that it comes to be read as a production of the depicted person herself; there is an inevitable elision between the qualities of precision and contrivance in the image and those qualities as inhering in the fictive subject; it is *her* look, her action on us, her composure, her composition of herself. But the gaze would not function as it does — as the focus of other uncertainties — were it not aided and abetted by the picture's whole composition. Pre-eminently, if it is access that is in question, there is the strange indeterminate scale of the image, neither intimate nor monumental; and there is the disposition of the unclothed body in relation to the spectator's imaginary position: she is put at a certain, deliberate marked height, on the two great mattresses and the flounced-up pillows,

a height which is just too high, and an attempt to make the nude, of all unlikely genres, exemplify the orders of social class.

in terms of the tradition, she is at a height which is just too high, suggesting the stately, the body out of relation to the viewer's body; and yet not stately either, not looking down at us, not hieratic, not imperial: looking directly out and across, with a steady, dead level interpellation. The stalemate of 'placings' is impeccably and typical, that is my point. If at this primary level — the arrangement within the rectangle, so to speak, the laying-out in illusory depth — the spectator is offered neither access nor exclusion, then the same applies, as I shall try to show, to the picture's whole representation of the body.

(b) What the critics indicated by talk of 'incorrectness' in the drawing of *Olympia*'s body, and a wider circuit of figures of dislocation and physical deformity, is, I would suggest, the way the body is constructed in two inconsistent graphic modes, which once again are allowed to exist in too perfect and unresolved an equilibrium. One aspect of the drawing of *Olympia*'s body is emphatically linear: it was the aspect seized on by the critics, and given a metaphorical force, in phrases like 'cernes de noir', 'dessinée au charbon', 'rates de cirage' 'avec du charbon tout autour', 'le gros matou noir . . . ait détenu sur les contours de cette belle personne, après s'être roulé sur un tas de charbon'.<sup>11</sup> (These are figures which register also a reaction to Manet's elimination of half-tones, and the abruptness of the shadows at the edges of his forms: but this, of course, is an aspect of his drawing, taken in its widest sense.) The body is composed of smooth hard edges, deliberate intersections: the lines of the shoulders, singular and sharp; the far nipple breaking the contour of the arm with an artificial exactness; the edge of thigh and knee left flat and unmodulated against the dark green and pink; the central hand marked out on a dark grey ground, 'impudiquement crispée' — in other words, as Pierrot implies, refusing to fade and elide with the sex beneath, in the metaphoric way of Titian and Giorgione. Yet this is an incomplete account. The critics certainly conceived of *Olympia* as too definite — full of 'lignes heurtées qui brisent les yeux':<sup>12</sup> but at the same time the image was accused of lacking definition. It was 'unfinis', and drawing 'does not exist in it'; it was impossible, elusive, 'informe'. *Olympia* was disarticulated, but she was also inarticulate. I believe that this is a reaction on the critics' part to other aspects of the drawing: the suppression of demarcations and definitions of parts: the indefinite contour of *Olympia*'s right breast, the faded bead of the nipple; the sliding, dislocated line of the far forearm as it crosses (touches?) the belly; the elusive logic of the transition from breast to ribcage to stomach to hip to thigh. There is a lack of articulation here. It is not unprecedented, this refusal; and in a sense it tallies well with

11 L. de Laincel, *L'Echo de Provinces*, 25 June 1865, p. 3.

12 P. Gille, *L'Intérnational*, 1 June 1865.

the conventions of the nude, where the body is regularly offered as a fluid, infinite territory on which spectators are free to impose their imaginary definitions. But the trouble here is the incomparability of this uncertainty and fullness with the steely precision of the edges which contain it. The body is, so to speak, tied down by drawing, held in place — by the hand, by the black tie around the neck, by the brittle inscription of grey wherever flesh is to be distinguished from flesh, or from the white of a pillow or the colour of a cashmere shawl. The way in which this kind of drawing qualifies, or relates to, the other is unclear: it does not qualify it, because it does not relate: the two systems coexist: they describe aspects of the body, and point to aspects of that body's sexual identity, but they do not bring those aspects together into some single economy of form.

(c) The manipulation of the signs of hair and hairlessness is a delicate matter for a painter of the nude. Peculiar matters of decorum are at stake, since hair let down is decent, but unequivocal: it is some kind of allowed disorder, inviting, unkempt, a sign of Woman's sexuality — a permissible sign, but quite a strong one. Equally, hairlessness is a hallowed convention of the nude: ladies in paintings do not have hair in indecorous places and that fact is one guarantee that in the nude sexuality will be displayed but contained: nakedness in painting is not like nakedness in the world. There was no question of *Olympia* breaking the rules entirely: public hair, for Manet as much as Cabanel and Giacometti, was indicated by its absence. But *Olympia* offers various substitutes. The hand itself, which insists so tangibly on what it hides; the trace of hair in the armpit; the grey shadow running up from the navel to the ribs; even, another kind of elementary displacement, the frothing grey, white and yellow fringe of the shawl, falling into the grey folds of pillow and sheet — the one great accent in that open surface of different off-whites.

There are these kinds of displacement, discreetly done; and there is an odd and fastidious reversal of terms. *Olympia's* face is framed, mostly, by the brown of a Japanese screen, and the neutrality of that background is one of the things which makes the address and concision of the woman's face all the sharper. But the neutrality is an illusion: to the right of *Olympia's* head there is a shock of auburn hair, just marked off enough from the brown of the screen to be visible, with effort. Once it is seen, it changes the whole disposition of head and shoulders: the flat, cut-out face, surrounded and rounded by the falling hair, the flower converted from a plain silhouette into an object resting in the hair below the head is softened, given a more familiar kind of sexuality. The qualification remains, however: once it is seen, this happens: be

in 1865 it was not seen, or certainly not seen to do the things I have just described. And even if it is noticed — the connoisseur's small reward for looking closely — it cannot, I would argue, be held in focus. Because, once again, we are dealing with incompatibilities precisely tuned: there are two faces, one produced by a ruthless clarity of edge and a pungent certainty of eyes and mouth, and the other less clearly demarcated, opening out into the surrounding spaces. Neither reading is suppressed by the other, nor can they be made into aspects of the same image, the same imaginary shape. There is plenty of evidence of how difficult it was to see, or keep seeing, this device. No critic mentioned it in 1865; the cartoonists eliminated it and seized, quite tightly, on the lack of loosened hair of *Olympia's* distinctive feature; even Gauguin, when he did a respectful copy of *Olympia* later, failed to include it. The difficulty is visual: a matter of brown against brown. But that difficulty cannot be disentangled from the other: the face and the hair cannot be fitted together because they do not obey the usual set of equations for sexual consistency, equations which tell us what bodies are like, how the world of bodies is divided, into male and female, resistant and yielding, closed and open, aggressive and vulnerable, repressed and libidinous.

Or we might want to make a more modest point. (Because a hidden feature is discovered, we should not necessarily treat ourselves to a feast of interpretation.) Whether it was noticed ('seen as') or not, the barely visible hair functioned as a further interference in the spectator's fixing and appropriating of *Olympia's* gaze. Hair, public or otherwise, is a detail in *Olympia*, and should not be promoted unduly. But the detail is significant, and it obeys the larger rule I wish to indicate. The signs of sex are there in the picture, in plenty, but drawn up in contradictory order: one that is unfinished, or rather, more than one; *orders* interfering with each other, signs which indicate quite different places for *Olympia* in the taxonomy of Woman; and none of which she occupies.

## VII

A word on effectiveness, finally. I can see a way in which most of what I have said about *Olympia* could be reconciled with an enthusiasm, in *Screen* and elsewhere, for the 'dis-identificatory practices' of art, 'those practices which displace the agent from his or her position of subjective centrality', and, in general, with 'an emphasis on the body and the impossibility of its exhaustion in its representations'.<sup>13</sup> It would be philistine not to take that enthusiasm seriously, but there are all kinds of nagging doubts — above all, about whether 'dis-identificatory practices' matter. The question is adumbrated by MacCabe when he writes:

13 C MacCabe, 'On Discourse, Economy and Society' vol 8 no 3, pp 307, 308, 303.

It is through an emphasis on the body and the impossibility of its exhaustion in its representations that one can understand the material basis with which the unconscious of a discursive formation disrupts the smooth functioning of the dominant ideologies and that this disruption is not simply the chance movement of the signifier but the specific positioning of the body in the economic, political and ideological practices.<sup>14</sup>

This seems to address the question which preoccupies me, and which I would rephrase as follows: Is there a difference — a difference with immediate, tactical implications — between an allowed, arbitrary and harmless play of the signifier and a kind of play which contributes to a disruption of the smooth functioning of the dominant ideologies? If so — I am aware that I probably exceed MacCabe's meaning at this point — artistic practice will have to address itself to 'the specific positioning of the body in the economic, political and ideological practices'; it cannot take its own disruptions of the various signifying conventions as something rooted, automatically, in the struggle to control and position the body in political and ideological terms; it has to articulate the relations between its own minor acts of disobedience and the major struggles — the class struggle — which define the body and dismantle and renew its representations. Otherwise its acts will be insignificant — as Manet's were, I believe, in 1865.

There is a danger of sounding a hectoring, or even a falsely optimistic, note at this point. Only a sense that the burden of modernity in the arts is this insignificance will save us from the absurdity of feeling that we are not involved in Manet's failure; it might lead us to make a distinction between those works, like Olympia, which succumb to modernity as a fate they do not welcome, and those bland battalions which embrace emptiness and discontinuity as their life's blood, their excuse their 'medium'. Olympia is not like these, its progeny; its failure to mean much is a sign of a certain obdurate strength. It is admirable in 1865 for a picture not to situate Woman in the space — the dominated and deracialised space — of male fantasy. But this refusal — to sound again the demanding note — is compatible with situating Woman somewhere else: making her part of a fully coded, public and familiar world, to which fantasy has entry only in its real, uncomfortable, dominating and dominated form. One could imagine a different picture of a prostitute, in which there would be depicted the production of the sexual subject (the subject 'subjected', subject to and subject of fantasy). Even, perhaps, the production of the sexual Subject in a particular class formation. But to do that — to put it crudely — Manet would have had to put a far less equivocal stress on the signs of social identity in this body and

this locale. In fact, as we have seen, the signs of social identity are as unstable as all the rest. Olympia has a maid, which seems to situate her somewhere on the social scale; but the maid is black, a convenient sign, stock property of any harlot's progress, derealised, telling us little or nothing of social class. She receives elaborate bouquets of flowers, but they are folded up in old newspaper; she is *faubourienne*. Ravelen is right, in her face and her disabused stare, but *courtesane* in her stately pose, her delicate shawl, her precious slippers.

Let me make what I am saying perfectly clear. Olympia refuses to signify — to be read according to the established codings for the nude, and take her place in the Imaginary. But if the picture were to do anything more than that, it (she) would have to be given, much more clearly, a place in another classed code — a place in the code of classes. She would have to be given a place in the world which manufactures the Imaginary, and reproduces the relations of dominator/dominated, fantasiser/fantasised.

The picture would have to construct itself a position — it would be necessarily a complex and elliptical position, but it would have to be readable somehow — within the actual conflict of images and ideologies surrounding the practice of prostitution in 1865. What that conflict consisted in was indicated, darkly, by the critics' own fumbling for words that year — the shift between *petite faubourienne* and *courtesane*. In other words, between the prostitute as proletarian, recognised as such and recognising herself as such, and the other, 'normal' Second Empire situation: the endless exchange of social and sexual meanings, in which the prostitute is alternately — fantastically — recognised as proletarian, as absolutely abject, shameless, seller of her own flesh, and then, in a flash, misrecognised as dominator, as *femme fatale*, as imaginary ruler. (This dance of recognition and misrecognition is one in which the prostitute shares, to a certain degree. But she is always able — indeed liable — to flip back to the simple assessment of herself as just another seller of an ordinary form of labour power. She has to be constantly re-engaged in the dance of ideology and made to collude again in her double role.)

I think I should have to say that in the end Olympia lends its peculiar confirmation to the latter structure, the dance of ideology. It erodes the *terms* in which the normal recognitions are enacted, but it leaves the structure itself intact. The prostitute is still double, abject and dominant, equivocal, unfixed. To escape that structure what would be needed would be, exactly, another set of terms — terms which would be discovered, doubtless, in the act of unsettling the old codes and conventions, but which would have themselves to be settled, consistent, forming a finished sentence.

It may be that I am asking for too much. Certainly I am asking for the difficult, and equally certainly for something Manet did not do. I am pointing to the fact that there are always *other* meanings in any given social space — counter-meanings, alternative orders of meaning, produced by the culture itself, in the clash of classes, ideologies and forms of control. And I suppose I am saying, ultimately, that any critique of the established, dominant systems of meaning will degenerate into a mere refusal to signify unless it seeks to found its meanings — discover its contrary meaning — not in some magic re-presentation, on the other side of negation and refusal, but in signs which are already present, fighting for room — meanings rooted in actual forms of life, repressed meanings, the meanings of the dominated.

How exactly that is to be done is another matter. It will most assuredly not be achieved in a single painting. (There is no hope for 'Socialism in one Art-work', to borrow a phrase from Art-Language.) A clue to Manet's tactics in 1865, and their limitations might come if we widened our focus for a moment and looked not just at *Olympia* but its companion painting in the *Salon*, *Jesus insulted by the Soldiers* (Figure 7). This picture was also unpopular in 1865: some critics held it to be worse than *Olympia*, even; and many agreed in seeing it as a deliberate caricature of religious art. But the operative word here is *art*: if the *Jesus* is paired with the *Olympia*, the effect of the pairing is to entrench both pictures in the world of painting: they belong together only as contrasting artistic categories, as bizarre versions of the nude and the altarpiece. The contrast with Courbet's procedure in 1853 is striking: where the opposition of *The Wrestlers*<sup>15</sup> and *The Bather* undermined the possibility of instating either term in its normal place in the canon, and reading it as pictures were meant to be read, the conjunction of *Olympia* and *Jesus* was meant to establish Titian (and perhaps even Baudelaire) all the more securely. Not that it did so, in fact; but this is the abiding paradox of Manet's art. In any case, *Olympia* and *Jesus* were far from being Manet's last word on the subject: the particular pairings and groupings of pictures in subsequent Salons, and the whole sequence of pictures displayed — or refused display — in the later 1860s, is much more open and erratic and rebarbative. (*The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* as the intended focus on the 1867 one-man show; *The Balcony* beside *The Luncheon in the Studio* in 1869; the attempt to paint a big picture of a Bicycle Race in 1870.) But the ambiguities of Manet's strategy are clear. What gives his work in the 1860s its peculiar force, and perhaps its continuing power of example, is that at the same time as his art turns inward on its own means and materials — clinging, with a kind of desperation, to the fragments of tradition left to it — it encounters and engages



MANET Christ insulté par les soldats, Art Institute of Chicago

a whole contrary iconography. Its subjects are vulgar; the fastidious action of paint upon them does not soften, but rather intensifies, their awkwardness; the painting's purpose seems to be to show us the artifice of this familiar repertoire of modern life, and call in question the forms in which the city contrives its own appearance. Doing so, as we have seen, excluded Manet's art from the care and comprehension of almost all his contemporaries; though whether that is matter for praise or blame depends, in the end, on our sense of the possible, now and then.

15 On *The Wrestlers* in 1833 see K Herding, 'Les Lutteurs', 'désertables', 'critique de style, critique sociale, Histoire et Critique des Arts', no 4-5, May 1978, which again examines the critical reaction in depth.